



# STEP UP

*Protect children  
from sexual abuse*



AGENCY OF HUMAN SERVICES  
DEPARTMENT FOR CHILDREN & FAMILIES

## Note to Readers:

We refer to both children<sup>1</sup> and youth throughout this guide. We generally use the term *youth* when we are talking about older kids.

If you are the parent, caretaker, friend, or relative of a teen, please keep in mind that this guide is about keeping them safe too.

To learn more about how Vermont keeps children safe, read the *Report on Child Protection in Vermont* at <http://dcf.vermont.gov/protection/reports>.

---

1. Vermont law defines a child as a person under the age of 18.

## © 2016, Vermont Department for Children and Families

Information in this guide may be reproduced for personal, educational, and non-profit use only. The Vermont Department for Children and Families should be identified as the source of the materials and any reproduction should not be represented as an official version of the materials reproduced.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**INTRODUCTION.....4**

**SECTION 1: EDUCATE YOURSELF.....5**

What Child Sexual Abuse Is. ....5

How Often It Happens.....6

Who Sexually Abuses Children.....7

How Sexual Abuse Happens.....8

What To Look For.....10

How to Recognize A Child’s Disclosure..... 13

How to Respond to a Child’s Disclosure.....16

**SECTION 2: PLAN FOR SAFETY.....17**

Step One: Identify Protective Factors.....17

Step Two: Identify Risk Factors.....18

Step Three: Develop A Plan .....20

Step Four: Put Your Plan Into Action.....21

**SECTION 3: TALK ABOUT IT..... 22**

Talk To Your Children About Healthy Sexuality.....22

Talk To Your Children About Personal Safety.....24

Talk to Other Adults About Child Sexual Abuse.....26

**SECTION 4: TAKE ACTION.....27**

If You Suspect Child Sexual Abuse.....27

If You Notice Inappropriate Behavior.....27

Situations You Might Encounter.....28

**SECTION 5: FIND RESOURCES.....32**

Advocacy Services.....32

Helplines & Hotlines.....33

Mental Health Services.....33

Referral Services.....34

Websites.....34

# INTRODUCTION

Child sexual abuse is a serious problem — most often committed by people we know and trust. Experts estimate that one in four girls and one in six boys<sup>1</sup> are sexually abused before their 18th birthdays. While this information is troubling, it's important to know that there are steps you can take as a parent to reduce the risk to your children.

The first, and perhaps most important, step is to take responsibility for protecting your children from sexual abuse. While you can and should teach them about personal safety and appropriate boundaries, they cannot be responsible for protecting themselves from sexual predators. *You are your children's most important protectors.*

You cannot, however, do it alone. You must depend on others (e.g., family members, friends, child care providers, and teachers) to help keep your children safe. We all need to step up to protect children and keep them safe from abuse no matter our relationship to them (e.g., parent, aunt, uncle, grandparent, family friend, or teacher).

This guide was produced by the Vermont Department for Children and Families (DCF), in partnership with community organizations, to help you prevent, identify, and react responsibly to child sexual abuse.

If these issues raise strong emotions because of your own history of sexual abuse, please be sure to seek out support and resources for yourself. *See a list of resources starting on page 32.*

---

<sup>1</sup> ACE Study - Prevalence - Adverse Childhood Experiences:  
<http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/ace/prevalence.htm>

## SECTION 1 - EDUCATE YOURSELF

Knowing the facts about sexual abuse can help you keep children safe. This includes:

- ➔ What child sexual abuse is;
- ➔ How often it happens;
- ➔ Who sexually abuses children;
- ➔ How sexual abuse happens;
- ➔ What to look for; and
- ➔ Why children may not tell.

### What Child Sexual Abuse Is

Child sexual abuse can include actual physical contact as well as behavior that does not include physical contact.

#### **Vermont's child protection law (33 VSA § 4912) defines sexual abuse as:**

*Any act or acts by any person involving sexual molestation or exploitation of a child, including:*

- *Incest, prostitution, rape, sodomy;*
- *Lewd and lascivious conduct involving a child;*
- *Aiding, abetting, counseling, hiring, or procuring of a child to perform or participate in any photograph, motion picture, exhibition, show, representation, or other presentation which, in whole or in part, depicts sexual conduct, sexual excitement, or sadomasochistic abuse involving a child;*
- *Viewing, possessing, or transmitting child pornography, with the exclusion of the exchange of images between mutually consenting minors, including the minor whose image is exchanged;*
- *Human trafficking, sexual assault, voyeurism, luring a child, and obscenity.*

### **Contact sexual abuse includes:**

- ⇒ Touching the genital area, over or under clothing;
- ⇒ Touching breasts, over or under clothing;
- ⇒ Forced touching of another person's genital area;
- ⇒ Oral sex; and
- ⇒ Vaginal or anal penetration with a part of the body (e.g., finger, penis) or with an object.

### **Non-contact sexual abuse includes:**

- ⇒ Invitation to touch another in a sexual way;
- ⇒ Voyeurism (Peeping Tom);
- ⇒ Encouraging or forcing a child to masturbate or to watch others masturbate;
- ⇒ Indecent exposure (flashing) or showing genital areas;
- ⇒ Involving children in the viewing or production of pornographic materials or in watching sexual activities; and
- ⇒ Encouraging children to behave in sexual ways (e.g., simulating intercourse).

## **How Often It Happens**

Child sexual abuse happens to children of all ages — from infants to teens. And it happens more often than most people think.

Experts estimate that one in four girls and one in six boys are sexually abused before their 18th birthdays.

## Who Sexually Abuses Children

It's impossible to describe a typical abuser. They:

- ➡ Look and act in various ways;
- ➡ Can be found in all areas of society; and
- ➡ Are often well-respected members of our communities.

They often appear to be kind, caring people who are great with kids. Abusers work hard to cultivate this image—so people will not suspect them of, and won't believe it if they are ever accused of, sexually abusing children.

Here's what the research, including the annual *Report on Child Protection in Vermont*, tells us:

- 1. Nearly all child sexual abuse is committed by people known to children and families. This includes:**
  - ➡ Family members such as parents, stepparents, siblings, grandparents, uncles, and cousins; and
  - ➡ People in a family's circle of trust such as friends, neighbors, clergy members, teachers, and coaches.
- 2. Most abusers are male — although females also sexually abuse children.**
- 3. Over a third of abusers are under the age of 20.**

**What abusers all have in common is this: they have thought about being sexual with children and they have acted on those thoughts.**

## How Sexual Abuse Happens

An abuser needs two things to sexually abuse a child:

1. Access to a child; and
2. Time alone with the child.

### *How Abusers Groom Children*

*Grooming* is a subtle, gradual, and escalating process of building trust with children and adults to gain access to and time alone with the children. It is deliberate and purposeful. Abusers may groom children for weeks, months, or years before any sexual abuse takes place.

Abusers often seek children who seem to be loners. They find ways to fill a need, giving them attention, offering to spend time with them, perhaps making statements like “I know how it is to need a friend”.

Grooming usually begins with behaviors that do not even seem inappropriate. This may include:

- ➔ Testing a child’s boundaries through telling inappropriate jokes, roughhousing, backrubs, tickling, or sexual games.
- ➔ Moving from non-sexual touching to “accidental” sexual touching. It can happen during play so the child may not even identify it as purposeful, inappropriate touching. It’s often done slowly so the child is gradually desensitized. It can be confusing for the child as the contact becomes increasingly intimate and sexual.
- ➔ The abuser may use the child’s fear, shame, or guilt about what’s happened to get them not to tell. They may also use bribes, threats, or coercion.



## ***How Abusers Groom Adolescents***

Grooming adolescents may include additional strategies, such as:

- ➔ Identifying with the adolescent. The abuser may appear to be the only one to understand him/her.
- ➔ Displaying common interests in sports, music, movies, video games, television shows, etc.
- ➔ Recognizing and filling the adolescent's need for affection and attention.
- ➔ Giving gifts or special privileges to the adolescent.
- ➔ Allowing or encouraging the adolescent to break rules (e.g., smoking, drinking, using drugs, viewing pornography).
- ➔ Communicating with the adolescent outside of the person's role (e.g., teacher or coach). This could include texting, emailing, social networking/Facebooking the teen without the parents' knowledge or permission.

## ***How Abusers Groom Adults***

It is not just children and adolescents who are groomed. Abusers also work hard to gain the trust of the adults around a child/youth (e.g., parents, other family members, and coworkers). This may include:

- ➔ Befriending the parents or other caregivers.
- ➔ Looking for chances to spend time alone with a child (e.g., offering to babysit, having the child over for a sleepover, and driving the child to sports events.)
- ➔ Developing romantic relationships with single parents to gain access to children.

## What To Look For

It's important for your children's growth and development to have supportive relationships with adults other than you. At the same time, you need to be mindful of who is spending time with your children since most child sexual abuse is committed by people families know and trust.

You may be thinking "How do I know who to trust?" *There is no easy answer.* But it might help to pay attention to a person's behavior rather than what you think about the person's character (e.g., she's so nice) or your relationship to the person (e.g., he's family, he'd never hurt our child).

Pay particular attention when an adult or older youth:

- ➡ Seems overly interested in, and creates opportunities to be alone with, your child.
- ➡ Displays favoritism towards one child in your family or a group of children.
- ➡ Gives special privileges or gifts to your child (e.g., money, trips, special favors).
- ➡ Befriends your family and shows more interest in a relationship with your child than with you.
- ➡ Plays with your child in a way that makes you uncomfortable.
- ➡ Seems "too good to be true" (e.g., babysitting for free, taking your child on special outings alone).
- ➡ Minimizes any concerns you raise about how he/she is interacting with your child.
- ➡ Creates opportunities to be around your child outside the context of their role as teacher, coach, etc.

While these behaviors do not necessarily indicate a person is *grooming* your child or family, they could be considered inappropriate.

## ***Concerning Adult/Youth Behavior***

Watch for any of the following behaviors:

- ⇒ Deliberately walking in on your child when they are dressing or using the bathroom.
- ⇒ Having your child watch them (adult/youth) when they are dressing or using the bathroom.
- ⇒ “Accidental” touching of genitalia.
- ⇒ Activities that involve removing clothes.
- ⇒ Consistent wrestling, tickling or roughhousing when the child is obviously uncomfortable.
- ⇒ Telling your child sexually-explicit jokes.
- ⇒ Teasing your child about breast or genital development.
- ⇒ Discussing sexually-explicit information with your child or showing your child sexually-explicit images or pornography.
- ⇒ Bathing or showering with your child.
- ⇒ Looking at or taking pictures of your child in his/her underwear or bathing suit.
- ⇒ Making sexual comments or sharing inappropriate stories about sexual activity.

**When reflecting on someone’s behavior, consider:**

- ⇒ Does it seem weird?
- ⇒ Does it make you feel uncomfortable?
- ⇒ Does it seem to happen all the time or too often?
- ⇒ Has anyone else commented or noticed?

(See *Section 4 - Take Action* for information on how you might respond to inappropriate behavior.)

### ***Concerns About Your Child's Behavior***

It is challenging enough to think about protecting your child from sexual abusers. It may be even more difficult to consider that your child might behave in sexually harmful ways that could victimize others. The annual *Report on Child Protection in Vermont* shows that over one third of abusers are under the age of 20.

It's not always easy to tell the difference between natural sexual curiosity and potentially abusive behaviors. It is essential to pay attention to your child's actions, know about healthy sexual development, and seek help if he/she exhibits any of the behaviors listed on previous pages. *See the resources starting on page 32.*

You may worry that you're overreacting or be concerned about the possible consequences of taking action. Evidence shows that the earlier children and youth get help, the better able they are to learn to control their behaviors. Your child will benefit from addressing the situation early.

The resource listed below has helpful information on this issue.

### ***Do Children Sexually Abuse Other Children? Preventing Sexual Abuse Among Children and Youth.***

Stop It Now!®.

351 Pleasant Street, Suite B-319

Northampton, MA 01060, USA

(413) 587-3500

[www.stopitnow.org/help-guidance/prevention-tools](http://www.stopitnow.org/help-guidance/prevention-tools)

## How to Recognize A Child's Disclosure

It's not always obvious when children disclose about sexual abuse. It can be easy to miss. Children are usually not this clear and direct: *I was sexually abused*. It might sound more like: *I don't want to go to Uncle Joe's house anymore* or *Please don't leave me alone with him*.

While children might disclose all at once, they are more likely to divulge a little bit of information at a time. This could happen over several hours, weeks, months, or even years as the children test people's reactions to their words.

During disclosure, children might seem hesitant, confused, or uncertain. After, they might even deny the abuse ever happened. This *is not* an indication that the abuse did not occur. Children often tell us more through their behaviors than their words. That's why it's important to know what to look for.

It is also important to keep this information in mind when considering whether a child may be hinting to you about his or her own sexually inappropriate behavior as this type of disclosure could look the same (e.g., the child might seem confused, uncertain, or hesitant).

While not necessarily an indication of sexual abuse, abrupt changes in your child's behavior should be looked into as they *do* indicate your child is in distress.

In all situations, communication is key. Regular, daily chats with your children about their activities and feelings can increase the likelihood that they would share any concerns they have with you.

## ***Pay Attention to Your Child's Behaviors***

If your child displays any of the following behaviors, there may be cause for concern:

- ⇒ Displays sexual knowledge/behavior beyond normal developmental stage; verbalizes what sexual contact looks or sounds like; mimics sexual behavior with toys.
- ⇒ Displays extreme behaviors, from a lack of emotion to aggressive and risk-taking behavior.
- ⇒ Suddenly changes eating habits or refuses to eat.
- ⇒ Acts out sexually and doesn't respond to limits.
- ⇒ Suddenly has nightmares or problems sleeping.
- ⇒ Displays sudden, unexplained personality changes or mood swings; acts out or becomes withdrawn.
- ⇒ Seems suddenly afraid to go certain places or spend time alone with a certain person.
- ⇒ Starts having problems at school (e.g., lower grades).
- ⇒ Becomes clingy, cries excessively, or seems sad.
- ⇒ Is overly protective of social network accounts (e.g. Facebook, Instagram), refuses to give you passwords to electronic devices (e.g., cell phone, Ipad).
- ⇒ Suddenly wants to spend time with younger children.
- ⇒ Refuses to talk about a secret.
- ⇒ Self injures (e.g., cutting, burning, attempting suicide), self medicates with drugs or alcohol, becomes sexually promiscuous, or runs away from home.
- ⇒ Talks about a new older friend; suddenly has money, toys or other gifts without reason.

If your child displays any of these signs, consider stressors in your child's life (e.g., divorce, death, problems with friends) that might be the cause. If the behaviors continue over a long period of time, you may want to seek professional advice.

## ***Why Children May Not Tell***

Research indicates that most victims of child sexual abuse never tell (or *disclose*) about abuse during childhood. A child's decision whether to tell does not rest solely with the child, it also depends on the behavior of the abuser and of the protective adults in a child's life.

There are many reasons children may delay telling or never tell. They might, for example:

- ⇒ Believe children must do what adults say.
- ⇒ Be afraid of not being believed or of being judged.
- ⇒ Feel ashamed, embarrassed, or responsible for the abuse.
- ⇒ Have been threatened by the abuser — with violence against themselves, their family, friends, or pets.
- ⇒ Not want to lose any perceived benefits (e.g., gifts, affection, love, acceptance, or status).
- ⇒ Not know who they can tell.
- ⇒ Be afraid of what will happen if they tell (e.g., the family will break up, a parent will go to jail).
- ⇒ Not recognize they have been abused. This is especially true for young children and those with disabilities.

You can increase the likelihood your children would tell by:

- ⇒ Talking about healthy sexual development, personal safety, and situations that may leave them confused.
- ⇒ Letting them know it's okay to tell a trusted adult about anything.
- ⇒ Allowing them to make choices about physical contact (e.g., don't make them kiss, hug or be held by family).
- ⇒ Telling them children are never responsible for abuse.

It's important to understand that your child may not be able to tell, and it's critical to pay attention to behavior.

## How to Respond to a Child's Disclosure

If your child tells you they have been sexually abused:

- ⇒ Find a private place to talk.
- ⇒ Stay calm. Displaying a strong reaction may cause your child to shut down. Don't overreact. Don't underreact.
- ⇒ Believe what your child tells you. Children are sometimes confused about the details, but they rarely lie about sexual abuse.
- ⇒ Thank your child for telling you and praise their courage. Let them know the abuse was not their fault.
- ⇒ Be careful not to make negative comments about the abuser since your child likely knows and cares about that person.
- ⇒ Don't question your child about the abuse. This could jeopardize an ensuing investigation. If your child wants to talk about the abuse, listen calmly and carefully. Afterwards, write down what they said in as much detail as you can remember.
- ⇒ Don't correct your child's language if they don't use the proper terms for private body parts. Use their language.
- ⇒ Respect the feelings your child is experiencing. All children express their feelings differently.
- ⇒ Tell your child you will be taking action to keep them safe, but be careful not to promise things you can't control (e.g., "I'll make sure he goes to jail").
- ⇒ Call DCF's 24-hour Child Protection Line to report the abuse: 1-800-649-5285. DCF staff will work with law enforcement to address the situation and will help you figure out the next steps.



## SECTION 2 - PLAN FOR SAFETY

There is no magic action you can take to guarantee your child's safety from sexual abuse and no personality type or situation that will act as a total safeguard. Providing your child with information about safe, caring relationships, including sexuality and sexual development, is an important prevention step.

Another important strategy for protecting your child is to plan ahead for their safety. There is some research on factors that may increase or decrease the likelihood of child sexual abuse – both about potential victims and those who will potentially engage in sexual harmful behaviors.

What follows is a partial list of factors. It's essential to consider the entire picture that makes up a child and the world she or he lives in. Everything we do to raise our children as healthy individuals with a strong sense of belonging and connection matters.

### Step One: Identify Protective Factors

Start by identifying factors from the list below that can act as safeguards against being victimized by, or engaging in, sexually harmful behaviors (called *protective factors*).

#### *My Child:*

- ☐ Displays confidence, has a positive outlook and positive body image.
- ☐ Is able to express a full range of emotions (e.g., anger, happiness, fear, sadness).
- ☐ Sets personal boundaries, respects other people's boundaries.
- ☐ Knows and uses the correct names for body parts, including genitals.

- Has a close, secure relationship with at least one adult.
- Is willing and able to be an active member in the community (e.g., participates in community functions and activities like girl or boy scouts or sports teams).

### ***My Family:***

- Uses the correct names for body parts, including genitals.
- Models healthy personal boundaries around touching, with other children and adults.
- Has strong, supportive relationships between family members and an extended network of support.
- Has consistent structure and routine, including spending time together.
- Has a sense of family connectedness and belonging; it feels safe at home, school and in the neighborhood.
- Adults provide close supervision, have clear boundaries, and carefully consider any situation involving alone time.

### ***My Community:***

- Is open about discussing issues related to child sexual abuse and ways to prevent it.
- Has widespread institutional support for healthy sexuality and personal safety.
- Child and youth-serving organizations have policies and procedures in place to keep children safe.

## **Step Two: Identify Risk Factors**

Next, identify factors that may increase your child's risk of being victimized by, or engaging in, sexually harmful behaviors (called *risk factors*).

### ***My Child:***

- ☐ Is insecure, has low self-esteem; feels lonely or disconnected.
- ☐ Does not know the correct names for body parts.
- ☐ Lacks access to information about sex and sexuality.
- ☐ Is exposed to videos, music, or video games that are violent, sexually explicit, or degrading to women.
- ☐ Has unsupervised access to technology (e.g., the Internet, cell phone).
- ☐ Has a disability (e.g., cognitive, physical, emotional and/or learning).

#### **Tip for Reducing Risk**

Eliminate or reduce one-on-one situations between adults/youth and children and you'll lower the risk of sexual abuse. Choose group situations when possible.

### ***My Family:***

- ☐ Does not supervise minors closely.
- ☐ Has children involved in one-on-one situations with an adult or older youth (e.g., tutoring, transportation).
- ☐ Has high levels of conflict, domestic violence, mental health and/or substance abuse issues in the home.
- ☐ Is socially isolated; lacks connection to the community; moves frequently and/or changes schools often.
- ☐ Lacks a strong bond between children and parents; no quality time together.

### ***My Community:***

- ☐ Has social norms that accept or perpetuate silence about sexual violence.
- ☐ Lacks institutional support for healthy sexuality and safety in places like schools, child care centers, etc.

## Step Three: Develop a Plan

Make a list of the protective factors you'd like to increase and the risk factors you'd like to decrease. Be specific. *See the examples below.*

**Protective child factor:** My daughter is a talented dancer, and she feels very confident about her abilities.

Actions I will take to strengthen it:

- ✓ Become more involved with dance (e.g., take her to the theater to see a dance production).
- ✓ Sew costumes for her dance troupe.

These strategies will help connect your daughter to a community as well as to you.

**Protective family factor:** Our family is committed to the safe use of technology. The only computer that has Internet access is in the living room where we monitor its use.

Actions I will take to strengthen it:

- ✓ Make sure my children know the family rules for using technology (e.g., never give out personal information or send photos) and understand the need for the rules.
- ✓ Review the rules regularly and revise them if needed.
- ✓ Take a class to stay current on technology.
- ✓ Install filtering and monitoring software on our computer.
- ✓ Know my children's passwords for all internet and phone accounts.

These strategies will help make sure you're aware of any unsafe situation and let your children know you are concerned and care.

### Helpful Resources

- [www.internetsafety101.org/](http://www.internetsafety101.org/)
- [www.netsmartz.org](http://www.netsmartz.org)

**Individual risk factor:** My son has a diagnosis of autism. He interacts with several providers on a one-to-one basis and needs help with personal activities like getting dressed.

Actions I will take to decrease the risk:

- ✓ Contact the service providers' employers to make sure the providers have current background checks (e.g., criminal records, child protection registry, adult abuse registry, sex offender registry).
- ✓ Make sure the providers' employers have policies to deal with inappropriate behavior and suspected abuse.
- ✓ Make it a habit to drop in unexpectedly to monitor the situation and have someone else drop in if I can't.
- ✓ Tell the people caring for my son that both he and I are educated about child sexual abuse.

These strategies let providers know you are paying attention and take sexual safety seriously.

**Family risk factor:** Our family just moved somewhere new. We don't know our new neighbors and are far from family and friends.

Actions I will take to decrease the risk:

- ✓ Start a new tradition of having "pot-luck dinners" with our neighbors so our family can get to know people in our neighborhood. *Be sure to monitor your children.*

This strategy can create a sense of belonging for you and your children and help to build protective relationships.

## Step Four: Put Your Plan Into Action

Follow through on the steps you've committed to taking. Review your plan regularly and make additions and adjustments as needed.

## Section 3 - Talk About It

Talking to your children about healthy sexuality and personal safety are important parts of prevention. Research tells us that children who have positive feelings and knowledge about their bodies, accurate information about sexuality, a sense of autonomy and power over their bodies, and open communication with their parents, are less likely to be targeted by abusers.

If talking about these issues raises strong emotions because of your own history of sexual abuse, seek support and resources for yourself (*see Section 5 starting on page 32*).

### Talk To Your Children About Healthy Sexuality

Below are some tips to help you have ongoing discussions with your children:

- ✓ Think about the messages you want to share—beforehand. As parents, we continuously convey messages to our children about our values and beliefs about sexuality. We do this through what we do, what we say, how we say it, and what we don't say. These messages can have a profound and long-lasting impact on our children.
- ✓ Start talking to them early and do it often. We start learning about sexuality from the moment we are born and this learning continues throughout our lives.
- ✓ Be open, honest, and positive. Inform yourself: read a book, take a class, or contact a community or statewide organization with expertise in this area. If you are uncomfortable talking about sexuality, practice.
- ✓ Seek opportunities. Take advantage of “teachable moments.”

- ✓ Provide your children with accurate information—appropriate to their ages and ability to understand (*developmentally-appropriate*). If you don't know what to say or how to answer your children's questions, offer to find the information or look for answers together.
- ✓ Show your children they can talk to you anytime and about anything. Be approachable. Listen. Try to understand their points of view. Be a consistent, reliable source they can go to with all their questions.
- ✓ Use the proper names for body parts (e.g., nose, ears, penis, vagina, etc.) This lets them know their bodies are natural and good, okay to talk about, and worthy of protection. It also gives them the correct language for understanding their bodies, asking questions, and talking about potentially inappropriate behaviors.
- ✓ Respond calmly when your children display sexual behaviors or ask questions that make you uncomfortable. Think about what you want to say before you say it. If you need time to gather your thoughts, take it. Teach your children that sexual feelings are normal and healthy.
- ✓ Don't just talk about "sex." Share your values and beliefs. Discuss issues such as caring, healthy relationships, and respect.
- ✓ Don't wait until your children ask questions. Some may never ask.
- ✓ Learn the stages of healthy sexual development and what to teach children at each stage. Know and practice the messages you want to share.
- ✓ If you need support or information, please go to Section 5: Find Resources (*see page 32*).

## Talk To Your Children About Personal Safety

It can be difficult to know what to say, how much to say, and when to say it. You don't want to confuse or scare your children, but you do want to keep them safe. Below are some general strategies for having ongoing discussions.

- ✓ Consider the messages you want to share—beforehand. Think of it as a process that evolves over time rather than one “big discussion.” Make sure the information you share with your children is appropriate to their ages and ability to understand (*developmentally appropriate*). Learn more about the stages of healthy sexual development at: <http://pcavt.org/index.php?id=168>
- ✓ Set and respect clear boundaries. All family members have the right to privacy (e.g., dressing and bathing). If someone acts in ways that violate these boundaries, it is an adult's responsibility to enforce the boundaries.
- ✓ As your children grow, encourage them to take ownership over their bodies (e.g., to dress and bathe themselves). This will help them learn about boundaries and privacy. As they become more independent, respect their increasing need for privacy.
- ✓ Teach your children about setting personal boundaries and getting consent. For example: ask them if they want to be hugged or picked up. Teach them to ask others if a touch is okay. Show them their “no” will be respected and that they need to respect other's “no”.
- ✓ Discuss what friendship is and isn't. As they get older, talk about healthy relationships (e.g., open communication, respect and trust, equal power).

**Helpful Resources from the Vermont  
Network Against Domestic & Sexual Violence**

<http://www.vtnetwork.org/publications/>



- ✓ Establish and teach your children safety rules about private parts of their bodies (e.g., penis, vagina, anus, breasts). These rules should cover touching, as well as the taking and sharing of images (e.g., photos and videos). Use concrete examples to help them understand. Let them know there may be situations when these things are okay. For example: with a young child you may say “mommy and daddy can help you stay clean and touch your penis when we wash it.” With teenagers, you might discuss the safety rules for using the internet and technology (e.g., not sharing any personal information or sexually suggestive images over the internet or on their cell phones).
- ✓ Let your children know it is okay to say “no” if someone does not follow the safety rules and okay to tell a trusted adult. Be careful, however, not to suggest that your children should/must protect themselves from sexual predators. It’s unrealistic to expect children to prevent sexual abuse. Be clear that keeping them safe is an adult’s job.
- ✓ Teach your children that secrets about touching and pictures are never okay, no matter who asks them to keep the secret.
- ✓ Help your children identify trusted adults they feel they can turn to for help. Let them know they can talk to these adults if they feel scared, uncomfortable, or confused. It’s important to help children identify more than one adult and to update this list regularly.
- ✓ Vermont schools are required to teach child sexual abuse prevention as part of K-12 comprehensive health education. Find out what your school is doing and when. Use this as another opportunity to talk with your children.

## Vermont's Consent Law

There can be significant, long-lasting consequences for teens who engage in illegal sexual behaviors. That's why it's important for teens to know and understand that the legal age of consent in Vermont is 16 years old, with the following exceptions:

- ➔ The persons are married to each other and the sexual act is consensual.
- ➔ The older person is under 19 years old, the child is at least 15 years old, and the sexual act is consensual (i.e., without force, threat, or coercion).

No person shall engage in a sexual act with a child who is under the age of 18 and entrusted to their care by authority of law or is their child, grandchild, foster child, adopted child, or stepchild.

**13 V.S.A. - Chapter 72 § 3252**

## Talk to Other Adults About Sexual Abuse

Talking to other adults about child sexual abuse can help raise the consciousness of your community and influence choices about child safety. Below are some tips to help:

- ✓ Ask your school or parent association to hold discussions/workshops on topics such as healthy sexual development, child sexual abuse, and sexual violence. Talk openly about these issues.
- ✓ Vermont schools and licensed child care centers are required by law to inform staff about the prevention, identification, and reporting of child sexual abuse. Ask questions: Have they trained staff about sexual abuse? How do they deal with inappropriate behaviors? What are their policies?

## SECTION 4 - TAKE ACTION

It is essential to the safety of all children that we as adults have the courage to take action when something seems wrong—whether it involves our children or someone else's.

### If You Suspect Child Sexual Abuse

If you suspect that a child is being, or has been, sexually abused, call Vermont's 24-hour Child Protection Line: 1-800-649-5285. The hotline makes it easy to share your concerns about a child with a trained social worker. *You do not need to be certain abuse has occurred to call.*

Try to have as much information on hand as possible, including:

- ⇒ The names of the child's parents/caretakers;
- ⇒ The child's name, date of birth, address, school or child care provider; and
- ⇒ The nature of your concerns.

### If You Notice Inappropriate Behavior

It can be difficult to identify behavior that is inappropriate, but not necessarily sexual abuse. You may see or hear something that is unsettling or has some kind of sexual energy. A situation may make you uneasy or just not feel right and though you have no reason to believe that sexual abuse has happened, you are still concerned.

For example:

- ⇒ You discover a teacher has been exchanging emails and text messages with your 14-year-old son, without your or the school's knowledge.
- ⇒ You overhear your 15-year-old daughter using sexually-explicit language around much younger kids.

When faced with a troubling situation, ask yourself:

- ⇒ Does this make me uncomfortable?
- ⇒ Does it seem odd?
- ⇒ Would it concern someone else?

Remember, inappropriate behaviors may not only make children uncomfortable, but may also be part of the grooming process. If you are hesitant to take action, ask yourself these questions:

- ⇒ Why am I reluctant to act? Is there a safety issue?
- ⇒ What's the worst that could happen if I'm wrong?
- ⇒ What if I'm right?

While confronting these behaviors can be difficult, the well-being of children must always come first. Intervening sends a clear message that you are paying attention, can help prevent abuse, and lets children know they are worth protecting.

### Helpful Resource

*Let's Talk: Adults Talking to Adults  
about Child Sexual Abuse  
(Speaking up to Prevent Child  
Sexual Abuse)*

Stop It Now!®  
351 Pleasant Street, Suite B-319  
Northampton, MA 01060  
(413) 587-3500  
[www.stopitnow.org/guidebooks](http://www.stopitnow.org/guidebooks)

## Situations You Might Encounter

On the pages that follow are examples of situations you may encounter and ways you might respond. As you are thinking about how you might respond in a given situation, consider the following questions:

- ⇒ What would I need to do to protect my children?
- ⇒ What could I do to help protect other children?
- ⇒ Should I talk directly to the person who is behaving inappropriately?

## **SCENARIO 1.**

You're looking for a child care provider for your son. You visit a provider's home based on a friend's recommendation and get a *funny feeling* about the provider.

- ➔ Trust your instincts. Look for another provider.
- ➔ Call the Child Care Consumer Line at 1-800-649-2642 to find out more information about the provider and report any concerns. Get the number of a local agency who can help you find a provider. Call that agency and ask to speak to the child care referral specialist.

## **SCENARIO 2.**

An uncle is playing with his niece in a way that makes you uncomfortable. (e.g., he continues to tickle her, in spite of her obvious discomfort and requests for him to stop).

- ➔ Address the situation directly with the uncle when it happens. You might say something like: "Your niece has asked you to stop, so stop." This lets both the uncle and niece know that you are paying attention and care.
- ➔ Pay attention to the ongoing behavior of the uncle. Supervise your children when he is around.
- ➔ Talk to the girl's parents about your concerns.

## **SCENARIO 3.**

You are monitoring your daughter's emails and come across sexually-explicit emails between her and a teacher. The teacher sent naked pictures of himself to your daughter and asked her to send naked pictures of herself to him.

- ➔ Call DCF's Child Protection Line immediately to report the situation: 1-800-649-5285.
- ➔ DCF will work with law enforcement to address the situation.
- ➔ DCF will help you figure out next steps, including getting support for your daughter.

### **SCENARIO 4.**

Someone interacts with your child in a way that crosses boundaries (e.g., a coach offers your child an unauthorized ride, a bus driver gives special treats to only your child).

- ➡ If it feels safe and appropriate to do so, talk to the person directly about his or her behavior.
- ➡ Contact the person's place of work (e.g., school, other child-serving organization) to report the behavior.
- ➡ Talk to your child about the situation.
- ➡ If you are still concerned about the situation, call DCF at 1-800-649-5285.

### **SCENARIO 5.**

You are worried about a situation involving someone else's child. For example: a camp counselor is spending time with a child outside of their role or a teacher is having sleepovers with a student.

- ➡ Contact the person's place of work to report your concerns.
- ➡ Ask them what they are going to do about the situation.
- ➡ Talk to the child's parents to express your concerns.
- ➡ Restrict that person's access to your children.
- ➡ Talk to your children.
- ➡ If you are still concerned about the situation, call DCF at 1-800-649-5285.

## SCENARIO 6.

You notice your teenage son is especially uncommunicative lately; has a sudden, keen interest in playing with younger kids; and has been watching movies with strong sexual content (contrary to your rules). Taken individually, you might not worry about any of these behaviors, but the combination of factors is concerning.

- ➔ Take immediate action. A quick response is essential to ensure the best possible outcome for all involved.
- ➔ Read the helpful resources published by Stop It Now!® (see pages 12 and 28 of this guide).
- ➔ Get professional advice about how best to respond, how to talk with your son about your concerns, and how to determine if further action is necessary.
- ➔ Address your concerns directly with your son in a straightforward, calm manner. Remember, this is a difficult conversation for both of you.

## SCENARIO 7.

You notice your teenage daughter finding excuses to not spend time alone with her dad; spending more time at her best friend's house, especially when you're not home; wearing baggy clothes; and not taking care of her appearance or personal hygiene the way she used to.

- ➔ Talk to her *alone* about the changes you've noticed.
- ➔ Remind her of your past talks about personal boundaries and safety. Reassure her that she can tell you about inappropriate behaviors by anyone, even family members.
- ➔ Get professional advice on how to talk to your daughter's father about your concerns, especially if you have any concerns about your or her safety.
- ➔ If you are still concerned about the situation, call DCF at 1-800-649-5285.

## SECTION 5: FIND RESOURCES

### Advocacy Services

#### Children's Advocacy Centers/Special Investigation Units

CAC's and SIU's coordinate multi-agency responses to child sexual abuse investigations and provide advocacy to child victims and their families.

- ➔ **Statewide Chapter** - Vermont Children's Alliance:  
www.vtchildrensalliance.org, (802) 735-7984 or 379-8846
- ➔ **Addison County** - Addison County SIU: (802) 274-5724
- ➔ **Bennington County** - Bennington County CAC & SIU:  
(802) 442-5107
- ➔ **Caledonia & Southern Essex** - Caledonia County SIU:  
(802) 424-1227
- ➔ **Chittenden County** - Child Advocacy Center at CUSI:  
(802) 652-0391
- ➔ **Franklin & Grand Isle Counties** - Northwest Unit for  
Special Investigations: (802) 524-7961
- ➔ **Lamoille County** - Lamoille County SIU: (802) 888-0558
- ➔ **Orange County** - Orange County SIU: (802) 685-4712
- ➔ **Orleans, Caledonia, and Northern Essex Counties** -  
Orleans County CAC & Northeast Kingdom SIU:  
(802) 334-6002, (802) 225-8357
- ➔ **Rutland County** - Child First CAC & Rutland SIU:  
(802) 747-0200
- ➔ **Washington County** - O.U.R. House of Central Vermont:  
(802) 476-8825
- ➔ **Windham County** - Windham County Safe Place CAC &  
SIU: (802) 579-1358



## ➡ Windsor County:

- ➡ CAC at The Family Place and Windsor County SIU:  
(802) 295-3882
- ➡ CAC at the Springfield Area Parent Child Center:  
(802) 295-3882

## Vermont Center for Crime Victim Services

[www.ccvcs.state.vt.us](http://www.ccvcs.state.vt.us)

Provides information to crime victims; supports them through the criminal justice system; and provides limited financial assistance to victims of violent crimes. Call 1-800-750-1213 or (802) 241-1250 to learn more.

## Vermont Helplines & Hotlines

- ➡ **Child Abuse Hotline (24/7):** 1-800-649-5285
- ➡ **Domestic Violence Hotline:** 1-800-228-7395
- ➡ **Parent's Helpline:** 1-800-CHILDREN (1-800-244-5373) during business hours
- ➡ **Sexual Violence Hotline:** 1-800-489-7273

## Mental Health Services

### Community Mental Health Centers

<http://mentalhealth.vermont.gov/DAlist>

For a list of centers that provide services to children and families throughout Vermont, call (802) 828-3824.

### Substance Abuse Treatment Providers

<http://healthvermont.gov/adap/adap.aspx>

For a list of treatment providers, call (802) 863-7200.

## Referral Services

### Vermont 2-1-1

<http://www.vermont211.org>

Dial 2-1-1 for help connecting to government programs, community-based organizations, and more—24/7.

### VT Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence

[www.vtnetwork.org](http://www.vtnetwork.org)

Call (802) 223-1302 to connect to the nearest sexual violence service agency for information, crisis support and referrals.

## Web Resources

### Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Sexual Abuse

<http://humanservices.vermont.gov/center-for-prevention-and-treatment-of-sexual-abuse>

The Center is mandated by Vermont law to coordinate and oversee the state's systematic response to sexual assault and child sexual abuse. The website includes resources for families, law enforcement and other professionals.

### NetSmartz

[www.netsmartz.org](http://www.netsmartz.org)

Age-appropriate resources to help teach children how to be safer online.

### Stop It Now's Online Help Center

[www.stopitnow.org/help-guidance/online-help-center](http://www.stopitnow.org/help-guidance/online-help-center)

Answer a few questions about your concerns to receive a customized selection of information and resources.

## Congratulations!

You have taken the time to educate yourself about child sexual abuse, how you can help keep children safer from sexual abuse, and how to recognize potentially abusive behaviors—in adults, youth, and perhaps in your own children.

While no one can prevent all instances of child sexual abuse, learning the facts and implementing the strategies found in this guide may decrease the likelihood that it will happen to your children.

## More Information

Go to <http://dcf.vermont.gov/prevention> for more information related to preventing child abuse, including information about safe havens for babies in Vermont, safe sleep for babies, and shaken baby syndrome.

# **Report Child Sexual Abuse**

If you suspect a child is being, or has been, sexually abused, call Vermont's 24-hour Child Protection Line to report it.

**1-800-649-5285**

Preventing sexual abuse helps ensure the safety, health, and optimal development of children.